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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ANKARA 000222

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [MARR](#) [KWBG](#) [IS](#) [TU](#)  
SUBJECT: TURKISH-ISRAELI RELATIONS: VOLATILE BUT RESILIENT

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[1](#)B. TEL AVIV 319

Classified By: Political Counselor Janice Weiner for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Turkish-Israeli relations, especially over the past 15 years are perhaps best described as one academic put it: "... (C) ompare it to a late-life love affair. Two parties who have known each other for years suddenly develop a near-passionate relationship, to the astonishment of their friends -- and their enemies. However, after awhile, passion cools and one party may be playing the field." No final chapter to this story has yet been written. The second intifada and the coming to power of the pro-Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002 were major factors behind a cooling of relations in recent years. Despite ups and downs over the past 50 years, the relationship between Turkey and Israel remains solid and is recognized as mutually beneficial by both countries. The fact that the two remain the only two truly functioning democracies in the region certainly plays a role. Whereas defense cooperation largely drove the warm bilateral ties that developed in the 1990s, today it is business and economic development that plays the largest role in maintaining an even keel in the relationship, even when the occasional political spat arises. END SUMMARY

#### TURKEY AND ISRAEL HAVE A FLIRTATIOUS HISTORY

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[1](#)2. (SBU) Turkey and Israel share a long history of relations dating back to the beginning of the Israeli state. Turkey was among the first countries to formally recognize the State of Israel in March 1949, about 10 months after Israel's declaration of its establishment, and the first majority Muslim nation to do so. Many scholars argue Turkey's decision at the time was largely a reflection of the poor state of Turkish-Arab relations. Turkey's Arab neighbors remained leery of their former Ottoman colonial masters and Turks and Arabs found themselves in opposing camps throughout the Cold War. Despite that, Israel's fervor for closer ties to its nearest non-Arab neighbor went unrequited. David Ben Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister, was quoted as having complained, "The Turks have always treated (us) as one treats a mistress, and not as a partner in an openly avowed marriage."

[1](#)3. (SBU) For years Turkey's political leaders were unable to fully commit themselves to Israel for several reasons. The long historical tradition of welcoming Jews fleeing persecution in Europe into the Ottoman Empire notwithstanding, the vast majority of Turks still viewed Israeli actions vis-a-vis Palestinians, especially after 1967, negatively. Turkish reliance on Arab oil supplies also argued against a full embrace of Israel. Nevertheless, for Israel, it seems a half-hearted hug was better than none.

[1](#)4. (SBU) The bilateral relationship improved dramatically in

the 1990s. The end of the Cold War and the progress made in Madrid and Oslo in the Middle East Peace Process eased both domestic opposition to, and the threat of Arab retaliation for, closer ties between Turkey and Israel. The bilateral economic relationship began to develop rapidly, with two-way trade quadrupling between 1991 and 1995.

#### MIL-MIL TIES DROVE THE RELATIONSHIP TO NEW HEIGHTS

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15. (SBU) Perhaps more significant at that time was the degree to which the bilateral defense relationship blossomed. During the 1990s, the two countries signed over twenty military-related agreements covering a broad swathe of bilateral defense cooperation. Among the highlights: the countries agreed in 1995 to allow for the training of air force pilots in each other's airspace; in 1996, Israeli Defense Forces advised and equipped Turkish security forces on the borders with Iran, Iraq, and Syria; in 1996-97 they agreed to jointly produce air-to-ground missiles; and Israel agreed to upgrade 54 Turkish F-4 Phantom jets. Similar deals followed in 1998 for Israel to upgrade 48 Turkish F-5s and in 2002 to upgrade 170 Turkish M-60A1 tanks. Turkish defense forces began participating in a trilateral (Turkish/Israeli/U.S.) military Search and Rescue (SAR) exercise (Reliant Mermaid) in January 1998. Follow-on exercises have generally been held annually since then. (NOTE: Reliant Mermaid was postponed in 2005 for scheduling/asset availability reasons and was again postponed in 2006 due to the Lebanon crisis.)

#### BUT THE HONEYMOON ENDED WITH THE SECOND INTIFADA...

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16. (C) Serhat Erkmen at the Center for Eurasian Strategic Studies (ASAM), an Ankara-based think tank, points to the second intifada in Gaza and the West Bank as a turning point in recent Turkish-Israeli relations. The effect of media coverage of the violence on Turkish public opinion and the GOT was notable. Then-Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit publicly scolded Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon during a joint press conference in Ankara in November 2001, rejecting Sharon's claims that Yasser Arafat "supports terror." Ecevit further enflamed tensions in April 2002 when he stated that Sharon's policy toward the Palestinians was tantamount to "genocide."

#### ...AND THE AKP BEGAN TO PLAY THE FIELD

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17. (C) The election of the pro-Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) of Recep Tayip Erdogan in November 2002, had a further impact on the Turkish-Israeli relationship. Upon assuming power, the AKP began slowly to shift the direction of Turkey's foreign policy to include a greater focus on its Middle Eastern neighbors, including both Arab states and Iran. The AKP believed Turkey, a member of NATO for over 50 years, with long-term aspirations of joining the European Union, had for too long neglected its neighbors to the south and east. In line with the vision laid out in "Strategic Depth," a book published in 2000 by PM Erdogan's foreign policy advisor, Ahmet Davutoglu, the GOT began engaging Iran, Syria, and others on a more regular basis, seeking to strengthen bilateral ties and increase Turkish influence throughout the region. According to Erkmen at ASAM, there is a camp within the AKP that is ideologically opposed to Israel and is anti-Semitic at its core. Erdogan has been known to make anti-Semitic comments on occasion. Even Vahit Kirsici, and AKP MP and chairman of the Turkish-Israeli Parliamentary Friendship group, admits that some AKP members came into parliament with a definite anti-Israel bias.

18. (C) Kirsici emphasized to us the importance AKP placed on

fostering its relations with all of its neighbors after 2002, especially for the Turkish economy. He said the AKP saw the need to improve not only political but also commercial and cultural ties in the region. This effort called for a more "dynamic" foreign policy than that pursued by previous governments in Ankara. The result is that Turkey, according to Kirschi, has a better platform from which to address the most difficult issues in the bilateral relationships with its neighbors. Turks point to the facilitative role they played in organizing the first official, public meeting between Israeli and Pakistani officials in September 2005 as evidence that it can help bridge the divide between the Islamic world and the West, including Israel.

#### BUT THE RELATIONSHIP LIVES ON

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¶9. (C) MFA Department Head for the Middle East, Sedat Onal, and Kirschi both argue that Turkish-Israeli relations are deep enough to withstand the most difficult challenges. Recent history supports that conclusion. The relationship was tested in 2004 when Erdogan blasted Israel's killing of then-Hamas leader Ahmed Yassin in March, calling it "a terrorist act." One month later, Erdogan described Israeli policy in Gaza as "state-sponsored terrorism." By summer 2004, however, then-Israeli Minister of Industry and Trade Ehud Olmert was visiting Turkey for a meeting of the Turkey-Israel Joint Economic Council and an \$800 million contract had been signed by Turkey's Zorlu Group to build and manage three energy plants in Israel. PM Erdogan visited Israel in May 2005, announcing the development of 17 new joint Turkish-Israeli military projects. After Hamas won the January 2006 Palestinian legislative elections, AKP officials, including FM Abdullah Gul, met "in their political party capacity" with Damascus-based Hamas leader Khaled Meshal in Ankara, in February. The meeting garnered fierce criticism from Israel as well as the United States. But by May, new Israeli FM Livni was visiting Turkey on her first official overseas trip, saying that "the issue of the Hamas visit in Turkish-Israeli relations has been closed."

¶10. (C) Israel often must overlook outbursts or politically embarrassing insults from Turkey. The Israeli DCM here told us Israel has accepted this aspect of the relationship and sees it for what it generally is: Turkish politicians playing to a domestic audience. She added, "They yell and scream and we choose to forgive and look the other way. The important thing is maintaining the relationship as best we can." Onal described the relationship with Israel as "one of the two main pillars" of Turkey's Middle East policy. Although events in the Middle East can impact "the speed at which we progress in our relations, they cannot impact the basis."

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Onal admitted privately to constantly having to do "damage control" when fiery rhetoric is unleashed in reaction to events in Israel and the Palestinian territories, but emphasized that no government in Ankara can unilaterally reverse the bilateral ties that bind Turkey and Israel.

#### BILATERAL BUSINESS TIES PLAY A KEY ROLE

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¶11. (SBU) The sharp increase in defense trade beginning in the 1990s played a large role in taking the bilateral economic relationship to new levels of cooperation. Prior to the warming of relations, the bilateral trade balance was generally tilted in favor of Israel, which exported technology and industrial products to Turkey, while importing agricultural goods and raw materials. However, the self-sustaining nature of strong bonds established between the business sectors in both countries led to increasing trade volume between Turkey and Israel outside of the defense field. And in recent years, the balance has turned dramatically in Turkey's favor. Bilateral trade in both 2005 and 2006 totaled over \$2 billion, a twenty-fold increase

since 1990, with Turkish exports outstripping imports from Israel by a ratio of nearly two-to-one. Compared to 1990 figures when the level of Israeli imports was a third larger than Turkish exports to Israel, the turnaround has been dramatic.

¶12. (C) The economic relationship will likely continue to grow. About 400,000 Israeli tourists (a record number) visited Turkey in 2006, while Turkish business interests in Israel (as well as potentially in Gaza) continue to expand. In December 2006, the two countries signed an ambitious memorandum of understanding agreeing to build pipelines that would transport oil, gas, water, and electricity from Turkey to Israel under the Mediterranean Sea. Although the economic and technical reality of this project is not at all clear, the Turks place great importance on this potential north-south link which could send oil and gas to Asian and global markets. GOT officials have indicated their intention is not only to establish the connection with Israel as a bilateral economic link, but also to help contribute to regional development and peace by linking in Jordan and the Palestinian territories to receive water and electricity as well. In April 2006, FM Gul signed an MOU with Palestinian officials with a view toward reopening an industrial zone at Erez in the Gaza strip. Despite the political uncertainty surrounding the future of the Palestinian Authority at the moment, Turkish officials remain committed to the project and the \$5 million donation the GOT promised to help rehabilitate the industrial park.

TRUE TO FORM: A STORM, A LULL, THEN A FLURRY

¶13. (C) The events in Lebanon during summer 2006 touched off a difficult period in the bilateral relationship. Following Israeli air strikes in Lebanon, the Turkish public mood turned fiercely anti-Israeli. AKP officials responded predictably, condemning Israeli actions. Parliamentarians were especially critical. Of 293 members who belonged to the bilateral parliamentary friendship group before the summer, by September, 256 had resigned. Vahit Karisci said it had not been easy for him over the past five months after he decided to remain as chairman of the group, noting many voters (and even his friends) in his district had expressed their displeasure with his decision; he added that he had received anonymous threats. He stayed because, as he put it, "We (the AKP) administer a country. It's our responsibility. We can't ignore what has happened, but we need to be realistic in foreign policy. And as a major regional actor, we need to remain engaged."

¶14. (C) The subsequent five months have played out in much the same way as past spats. An expected visit by PM Olmert to Turkey at some point during Fall 2006 (a return visit for Erdogan's 2005 trip to Israel) was continually pushed off by the Turks, despite Israeli requests for specific dates. The Turkish General Staff decided in August 2006 to postpone Exercise Reliant Mermaid until 2007, citing "current developments in the region and the evacuations in the eastern Mediterranean." nevertheless, by December 2006, Turkish Deputy Chief of Defense General Saygun was holding high-level defense talks with his counterpart in Israel. A February 15 date has been set for PM Olmert's visit to Ankara. MFA Undersecretaries will meet the week of February 7 for annual political consultations, and Trade Minister Tuzmen will lead a Turkish delegation to the annual meeting of the bilateral joint economic cooperation council in early March. Finally, GOT officials tell us Erdogan will likely visit Israel, as well as Gaza/West Bank, this spring, prior to the May presidential elections in Turkey. And, as reported in ref a,

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the GOT has offered its good offices in helping to facilitate a prospective meeting involving Olmert, PA President Abbas, and Secretary Rice in the future. In short, the pragmatic relationship is on track.

¶15. (C) COMMENT: Turkish-Israeli ties, like any relationship, require a degree of compromise, both between the parties, and at times between each party and its own priorities. Israel, admittedly, seems most often to swallow hard and put on a brave face in response to the occasional Turkish outburst. And the margin of error can be slim in how far a misstep can set back the overall relationship. For example, the Israeli DCM worried recently about the impact a possible decision by El Al to withdraw from the Tel Aviv-Istanbul route might have on the relationship as Turkish officials might read more into that purely commercial decision than is warranted. After the January 30 announcement that El Al will cease its operations in Istanbul beginning in March, the GOT expressed concern about the decision, but it remains to be seen whether there will be any long-term impact on relations. However, if past experience is a guide, regardless of what politicians might say or do, in the end the relationship will continue to deepen, to the benefit of both countries.

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